



Review

The importance of academic literacy for undergraduate nursing students and its relationship to future professional clinical practice: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This systematic review was designed to assess the importance of academic literacy for undergraduate nursing students and its relationship to future professional clinical practice. It aimed to explore the link between academic literacy and writing in an undergraduate nursing degree and the development of critical thinking skills for their future professional clinical practice.

Design: A systematic review of qualitative studies and expert opinion publications.

Data Sources: A systematic literature search was undertaken of the following databases: ERIC, PubMed, CINAHL, MEDLINE and Scopus. All papers reviewed were from 2000 to 2016 and were written in English.

Review Methods: We identified 981 studies and expert opinion papers from the selected databases. After reviewing key words and abstracts for the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 48 papers were selected for review. These were read and reread, with 22 papers, including one thesis, selected for quality appraisal. One paper was discarded due to the exclusion criteria.

Results: Three major themes were evident from this study. First, students need assistance to develop tertiary level academic literacy skills when they commence their undergraduate nursing degree. Second, that teaching practices need to be consistent in both designing assessments and in giving feedback to students, in order to assist improvement of academic literacy skills. And finally, academic literacy can facilitate critical thinking when students are assessed using discipline specific genres that relate to their future professional nursing practice.

Conclusions: This review highlights the importance of critical thinking in clinical nursing practice and its strong relationship with academic writing skills. It has shown critical thinking is discipline specific and nursing students need to be taught discipline specific literacy genres in undergraduate nursing degrees. Nursing has a diverse educational and cultural mix of students, and educators should not assume academic literacy skills upon commencement of an undergraduate nursing programme.

1. Introduction

1.1. Objective

The importance of both effective writing and critical thinking for a graduate nurse in professional clinical practice is paramount (Whitehead 2002). Good written communication skills are a vital aspect of competent nursing, as they reduce errors in the clinical environment and ensure patient safety (Hillege et al. 2014). Patient care can be compromised by a nurse's poor writing and communication skills

(Jefferies et al. 2012). Thus it is an expectation that all nurses be proficient in writing clear and concise documentation, in order to be safe practitioners and provide quality patient care. All nursing records are legal documents and evidence of the care given, therefore they need to be accurate in order to minimise errors and adverse incidents in care (Roberts and Goss, 2009).

2. Background

It cannot be assumed that students commence their nursing

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programme with a tertiary level proficiency in academic literacy (Gimenez 2008). In fact, many students enter into an undergraduate nursing program with little or no prior experience in academic studies and limited confidence in their writing abilities (Whitehead 2002). Students in undergraduate nursing programs are expected to become proficient in different styles of academic writing including the use of conventional essay format, reflective writing, research projects and writing reports. Students may find this challenging as each style requires a range of literacy and language skills, and competence in using different genres in writing (Gopee and Deane, 2009). In particular students need to write in an academic style that demonstrates evidence of critical thinking and a proficient use of language, structuring and argument (Borglin and Fagerstrom 2012). Thus, it may be an unrealistic expectation for students in their first year of nursing studies to be proficient in using academic writing skill.

In Australia, there is increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in our universities, and in disciplines such as nursing due to future employment prospects (San Miguel et al. 2013). International students with low level English proficiency have been found to experience poorer academic performance outcomes and higher failure rates than domestic students who are proficient in English (San Miguel et al. 2013). There are several key areas identified from the literature that contribute to a student developing effective academic literacy.

One is embedded learning. Universities are adopting practices to support ESL (English as a second language) students through the use of embedded learning strategies, writing assistance workshops, and one-on-one support. However, local students who need literacy support due to their diverse cultural, linguistic or education backgrounds are not always identified and therefore may not receive the assistance they require (Hillege et al. 2014).

Another strategy is the development of critical thinking skills. While it is commonly accepted that critical thinking is an important part of nursing practice, there is no universal definition of critical thinking, especially in the nursing context (Hernandez 2009). Hernandez (2009) identifies the main areas of critical thinking are reflection, creativity, contextual perspective, and open-mindedness. In their study Borglin and Fagerstrom (2012) state that critical thinking involves the ability of a student to read and evaluate written material, as well as being a synthesis of attitudes, knowledge and skills. The lack of one universal definition means that both students and educators alike may not have a clear understanding of what is expected when learning or teaching critical thinking, possibly leading to confusion and a gap between student and academic expectations.

Critical thinking is essential for nursing competence in a clinical environment (Hernandez 2009), and will promote writing proficiency through the formulation of ideas and construction of an argument. The different genres of writing in nursing degrees are used to encourage the development of critical thinking skills.

A third area is the use of reflective writing. Reflective writing is one strategy that is commonly used as a teaching method in nursing degrees worldwide. Simpson and Courtney (2007) stated that reflective writing can guide critical thinking through the analysis and evaluation of a student's clinical experiences, as well as assisting ESL students with English writing proficiency. Hernandez (2009) agreed that reflective writing is an effective tool for evaluating student experiences and opinions. The study by Mun (2010) highlighted that reflections written by students while on clinical rotations gave educators insight into where additional support was needed in developing these important critical thinking, writing and communication skills.

Gimenez (2012) argues that critical thinking must be taught within the nursing context so that it is meaningful for student nurses. Therefore, methods of teaching critical thinking in nursing should take a different approach to how critical thinking is taught in other disciplines. Nursing undergraduate degrees need a discipline specific focus in teaching methods. The approach to learning needs to be specific to nursing in order for students to become engaged with the content and

understand the application to clinical practice (Gimenez 2012), as the importance of critical thinking skills and writing proficiency is not always linked by students to their future nursing practice. This review examined the relationship between teaching writing and critical thinking skills, and the student nurse's future professional clinical practice.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

A systematic review protocol was developed to explore how developing academic literacy in undergraduate student nurses leads to the development of critical thinking and professional written literacy competence in their future professional practice.

3.2. Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was undertaken with the support of a librarian in each of the following databases: ERIC, PubMed, CINAHL, MEDLINE and Scopus. The search was conducted using the following terms: “education”, “nursing AND/OR education”, “baccalaureate AND/OR education”, “nursing”, “continuing AND/OR education”, “nursing”, “graduate AND/OR nursing education research”, “undergraduate student nurses”, “nursing education”, “critical thinking”, “academic literacy”, “academic writing”, “academic skills”, “scholarly papers”, “essays”, “formal written assignments”, “paragraph writing”, “constructing paragraphs”, “progressive note writing”, “reflective writing”, “journal writing”, “higher education”, “tertiary education”, “writing pedagogy”, “educational theories”, “professional competence”, “clinical practice”, “professional practice”.

After the search of databases, and the exclusion of duplications, 981 articles were identified. Using the inclusion and exclusion criteria to screen the titles, and/or abstracts, 48 articles remained. Five members of the research team read and reread these articles to determine their eligibility in the study. From this process, 21 articles and one thesis were included in this review (see Fig. 1).

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

All articles included were either qualitative, mixed method, or expert opinion papers published between 2000 and 2016, and written in English. The reviewed articles discussed how academic writing, such as essays, formal journals, portfolios, and other written items of assessment found in undergraduate nursing education programmes developed critical thinking for future professional practice. Papers were excluded if they discussed postgraduate nursing students or the development of critical thinking in assessments that did not have an academic writing component.

3.4. Quality Appraisal

Quality appraisal of the remaining 22 articles was carried out using the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) tool. The CASP tool is a checklist used to assess the methodological quality of qualitative studies (Zeng et al. 2015). Each article was rated using quality scoring of “+ + +” high, “+ +” medium, and “+” low (Goldsmith et al. 2007). One article was discarded at this point as it focused too heavily on postgraduate nurses. The 21 articles were then reread to confirm their eligibility.

3.5. Data Analysis

From the retrieved articles that meet all the inclusion criteria data were extracted using predesigned data collection form. Data were collected using the following headings: author and date, design and data

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